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Title: Sex(d)uality : a note on Carson McCullers' literary preoccupations

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Citation style: Sobieraj Jerzy. (1996). Sex(d)uality : a note on Carson McCullers' literary preoccupations. W: T. Rachwał, T. Sławek (red.), "Representations of the erotic" (S. 98-101). Katowice : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego



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Sex(d)uality: A Note on Carson McCullers' Literary Preoccupations

The popularity of gender studies has been constantly increasing in recent decades. "The terms 'masculine' and 'feminine', which the eighteenth-century biographer assumed were standard measures, have become for twentieth-century readers the first objects of critical measurement."¹ Sexuality of man, one of important, though not exclusive, aspects of gender theory, has appeared to be a favorite subject of the twentieth-century literature.

The theme emerges as significant in American fiction of the 1930s and 1940s, especially in the writings of Henry Miller, Gore Vidal, Truman Capote, and Carson McCullers, the novelists who started their careers at that period.

McCullers focusing in her fiction on human nature, identity, and psychology is particularly occupied with the sphere of sexuality. And also in her poetry she tries to express her doubts and convictions concerning the above, the traditional division into "masculine" and "feminine" and, related to this, search for identity. A fine illustration of these subjects can be found in the following lines:

Why are we split upon our double nature, how are we planned?
Father, upon what image are we spanned?

...
We suffer the sorrow of separation and division
With a heart that blazes with Christ's vision:
That though we be deviously natured, dual-planned,
Father, upon Thy image we are spanned.²

Relating both human nature and likeness to God is the obvious parallel. Also the idea of sexual duality is rooted in God, creator of mankind. "So God created man

¹ Myra Jehlen, "Gender", in Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (eds.), *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 263–264.

² Carson McCullers, *The Mortgaged Heart* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 298.

in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”(Genesis 2, 27). It is not an unusual tendency of man to create an anthropomorphic image of God. Traditionally, this image must be also andromorphic (Father, Lord) and, as Miguel de Unamuno emphasizes, the presence of the feminine element makes the creator the ideal picture of man.³

“Double vision”, “Nothing resembles nothing”, “Man’s transfigured vision” are only a few phrases from McCullers’ poetry dealing with duality of man and diversity of human nature. “Stone Is Not Stone” is the poem in which McCullers poses the question of man’s identity and his uncertainty about the world which surrounds him.

There was time when stone was stone
And a face on the street was a finished face
Between the Thing, myself and God alone
There was an instant symmetry.
Since you have altered all my world this trinity is twisted:
Stone is not stone
And faces like the fractioned characters in dreams are incomplete
Until in the child’s inchoate face
I recognize your exiled eyes.
...⁴

One might well go to the words of the poems trying to find a suitable motto to McCullers’ fiction, especially to her 1943 novelette, *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*.

The Ballad is the story of a complicated relationship among three grotesque characters, Amelia, Lymon, and Marvin. Amelia Evans, who emphasizes her strong ties with her father, is introduced as having “a face like dim faces known in dreams – sexless and white, with two gray crossed eyes”, “She was a dark, tall woman with bones and muscles like a man. Her hair was cut short and brushed back from the forehead, and there was about her face a tense, haggard quality.” She “cared nothing for the love of man and was a solitary person. Her marriage... was... strange and dangerous... queer”, she was “dressed in overalls and gum boots.”⁵

Lymon Willis who, one day, appears at the door of Amelia’s house and convinces her to be her cousin, is a hunchback with “a very large head, with deep-set blue eyes and a sharp little mouth” and “lavendar shadows beneath his eyes”. When Amelia took closer care of him he changed his attire and “On his skinny legs he wore black stockings... and a shawl of lime-green wool.”⁶

³ Miguel de Unamuno, *O poczuciu tragiczności życia wśród ludzi i narodów* (*Del sentimiento tragico de la vida en los hombres y en los pueblos*), tr. Henryk Woźniakowski (Kraków, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1984), p. 190. See also Jerzy Sobieraj, “O interpretacji religijnej powieści Carson McCullers ‘Serce to samotny myśliwy’”, in Wojciech Kalaga and Tadeusz Sławek (eds.), *Interpretacje i style krytyki* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 1988), pp. 31–32.

⁴ Carson McCullers, *The Mortgaged*... , p. 299.

⁵ Carson McCullers, *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* (New York: Bantam Books, 1964), pp. 3–5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 18.

Marvin Macy is handsome, tall, and hard-muscled with the worst possible reputation, a man who killed somebody and degraded several young girls.

What may strike the reader is the sexual inversion or ambivalence of Amelia and Lymon. The traditional proportion between the masculine and the feminine elements is clearly disturbed here. Amelia and Lymon seem to be a perfect illustration of what, as Mary Roberts suggests, Virginia Woolf expounds in *Orlando*:

Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male and female likeness while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what is above.⁷

Amelia's cloths, looks, and behavior resemble a male character whereas Lymon is Amelia's opposite; delicate and weak, often crying, he would be a picture of a female type. The crucial difference between Amelia and Lymon seems to be, respectively, her activity and energy and his passivity, the features which in early age of both sexes might be a sign of a possibility of developing their future homosexuality.⁸

Amelia taking care of Lymon emasculates him disguising her cousin into a woman.

Beneath this was a fresh red and black chequered shirt belonging to Miss Amelia. He did not wear trousers such as ordinary men are meant to wear, but a pair of tight fitting little knee-length breeches. On his shiny legs he wore black stockings, and his shoes were of a special kind, being queerly shaped, laced up over the ankles. . . . he wore a shawl of lime-green wool, the fringes of which almost touched the floor.⁹

Masculine Amelia additionally emphasizes feminine features of Lymon thus making her love relationship with her cousin more natural and justifiable. The characters desperately search for complimentary types. Masculine Amelia accepts feminine Lymon who becomes emotionally attracted to manly Marvin, who marrying Amelia is blind enough to notice that she would never accept a dominant husband.

But no matter how complicated and ambivalent sexuality of the characters of *The Ballad* is they tend to look for true love and possible reciprocity. Those short periods during which they are involved in emotional relationships are significant as time of change, change for better.

⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 103. Also quoted and discussed in Mary Roberts, "Imperfect Androgyny and Imperfect Love in the Works of Carson McCullers", *University of Hartford Studies in Literature*, Vol. XII, (1980), p. 75.

⁸ For a discussion of the relationship between behavior of children and possible development of homosexual tendencies see Anne Moir's and David Jessel's, *Brain Sex. The Real Difference Between Men and Women*. I am using a Polish text translated by Nina Kancewicz-Hoffman, *Płeć mózgu* (Warszawa: PIW, 1993), p. 174.

⁹ Carson McCullers, *The Ballad*. . . , p. 18. Emasculating Lymon is also discussed in Robert S. Phillips' article, "Painful Love. Carson McCullers' Parable", *Southwest Review*, Vol. LI, No. 1 (Winter, 1966), p. 81.

Though sexual duality of the characters does not annihilate the chance for real relationships, it certainly makes it difficult. "Imperfect androgyny" may result in "imperfect love", to borrow a phrase from Mary Roberts' essay¹⁰. The love of the lover is never reciprocated by the beloved.

Though making us aware of how unsuccessful the communication between the unstereotyped and ambivalent characters can often be Carson McCullers emphasizes the strong and desperate need for relationships, for true love, which makes all human beings equal, irrespective of their nature, looks, or preferences.

¹⁰ Mary Roberts, *Imperfect Androgyny*. . . , p. 73.

Jerzy Sobieraj

Seksualne orientacje w twórczości Carson McCullers

Streszczenie

Carson McCullers, zarówno w swej twórczości prozatorskiej, jak i w utworach poetyckich, podejmuje problem kształtowania się osobowości postaci, szczególnie eksponując sferę orientacji seksualnej. Tradycyjny podział płci na żeńską i męską ulega w utworach pisarki swoistej inwersji. Zniewieściali bohaterowie i zmaskulinizowane bohaterki poszukują swego miejsca w świecie, jednakże zakłócenie proporcji pomiędzy męskim a żeńskim pierwiastkiem ich osobowości staje się przyczyną wielu problemów, prowadząc często do ostatecznego osamotnienia.

Jerzy Sobieraj

Les Orientations sexuelles dans l'oeuvre de Carson McCullers

Résumé

Aussi bien dans son oeuvre de prose que dans ses poèmes, Carson McCullers parle du problème de la formation de la personnalité de personnages en exposant particulièrement la sphère d'orientation sexuelle. La division traditionnelle en sexe féminin et masculin subit dans son oeuvre une inversion spécifique. Les héros effeminés et les héroïnes „mâles” cherchent leur place dans le monde, mais le déséquilibre entre les proportions d'éléments mâle et féminin de leurs personnalités est à l'origine de beaucoup de problèmes qui aboutissent à la solitude définitive.